

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Colonel Wolfgang William Romer 1640-1713

Europe in the 17th century was a world apart from our own, with England, France, and Spain waging almost constant war in shifting coalitions. The modern map of Europe was still far in the future three centuries ago, when Germany and Italy were fragmented into many independent states, Belgium did not exist, and the Low Countries were divided between the Spanish Netherlands and the Republic of the United Netherlands, commonly called Holland. It was to Holland that Mathias Romer of Dusseldorf was posted as Ambassador for the Elector Palatine, ruler of part of what is now West Germany, during the height of the Thirty Years' War of 1618 to 1648. Here, in The Hague, was born this third son, Wolfgang William Romer on April 23, 1640. The chaotic international politics of 17th century Europe

will help to explain how this German child, born in Holland, would serve as an English military engineer on the coast of Maine.¹

Little is known of Wolfgang William Romer's early life, but his upbringing must have been aristocratic. His godfather was the Elector Palatine. Presumably Romer's education was in the best schools, and early on this must have meant a continental military academy. By the 1680s he was a military engineer in the service of Prince William of Orange, head of the royal family of the United Netherlands.

In November, 1688, by then a Colonel, Romer sailed with Prince William to England to depose James II. Three months later Prince William was King William III, joint ruler with Queen Mary, and suddenly Colonel Romer was in the service of England. These were busy times for military engineers. The deposed King James attempted to regain his crown by using Ireland as a base. Romer accompanied King William there in 1690, campaigning for two years to eradicate the Jacobean menace and designing fortifications for Cork, Longford, and Thurles.

Meanwhile, England was again at war with France, this time allied with Holland, the German States, Sweden, and Spain. In July, 1692 Romer was transferred from Ireland to England and appointed Chief Engineer of Artillery on the Isle of Wight, embarking with 14,000 troops to rendezvous with the Royal Navy on the Dorset coast for an invasion of France. After this operation was cancelled, he was appointed Chief Engineer of Ordinance for the Mediterranean campaign in 1693. A year later he was assigned the role of redesigning the defenses of Guernsey, one of England's strategic Channel Islands off the French coast. Two points should be made about all of these assignments. First, they were made by Royal Warrants, not by order of a superior officer; and second, Colonel Romer was paid twenty shillings (one pound) per day. This may sound like a hardship until one realizes that early in our own century many an English working man was earning one pound per week.

If Colonel Romer's close connection and high reputation with King William can easily be inferred by his career so far, an episode in 1697 is proof of his position in England. That year he was ordered to New York by Master-General of Ordnance Lord Romney. Perhaps Romer had no desire to serve in the Colonies, or perhaps there was ill feeling between him and his immediate superiors. Regardless of the reason, he refused the assignment on the basis of twenty shillings per day, and Lord Romney immediately suspended him from royal service. A War Office letter to Lord Romney from one of his colleagues noted that the Master-General had "most justly suspended Col. Romer for his Undutyfull Refusing to obey your Lordship's Order to go to New York", and added that Romer was "But of a middle Age And to all appearance of a strong constitution" to have been so audacious.² A strong constitution indeed. King William, however, immediately interceded, reinstated Colonel Romer, and increased his pay to thirty shillings per day. The Board of Ordnance was furious:³

His Majesty's favor in taking off the suspension, and granting him additional extraordinary pay after he had so peremptorily refused to go as Engineer to New York may give great encouragement to such practices, and very much prejudice the service.

The Board need not have worried; few had Romer's connections. That summer he sailed to New York with the new colonial governor, the Earl of Bellomont.

Romer's service to the Crown in the New York Colony is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that between 1697 and 1706 he mapped the Hudson River Valley, explored and mapped large areas of upstate New York (in the process establishing good relations with the Iroquoian Five Nations), designed and built defensive outposts on the frontier (many at his own expense), planned and constructed Fort Albany, and was appointed to the Council of New York. Paralleling the importance of his work to Maine historical archaeology, his 1698 plan of the town of Albany precisely identified the location of the Dutch Reformed Church alms house property, which then included "The Indian Praying House," near or at the site of the alms house built in 1686 and uncovered by archeologists during recent construction work. The same map also shows with great accuracy the site of Fort Orange, abandoned since 1676, south of the town, greatly assisting archeologists in relocating the site in 1970 prior to new highway construction.⁴

Between 1701 and 1703 Colonel Romer designed a complete set of defenses for Boston Harbor, featuring Fort William on Castle Island. But before that, in 1699 and 1700, he turned his skilled attention to Maine.

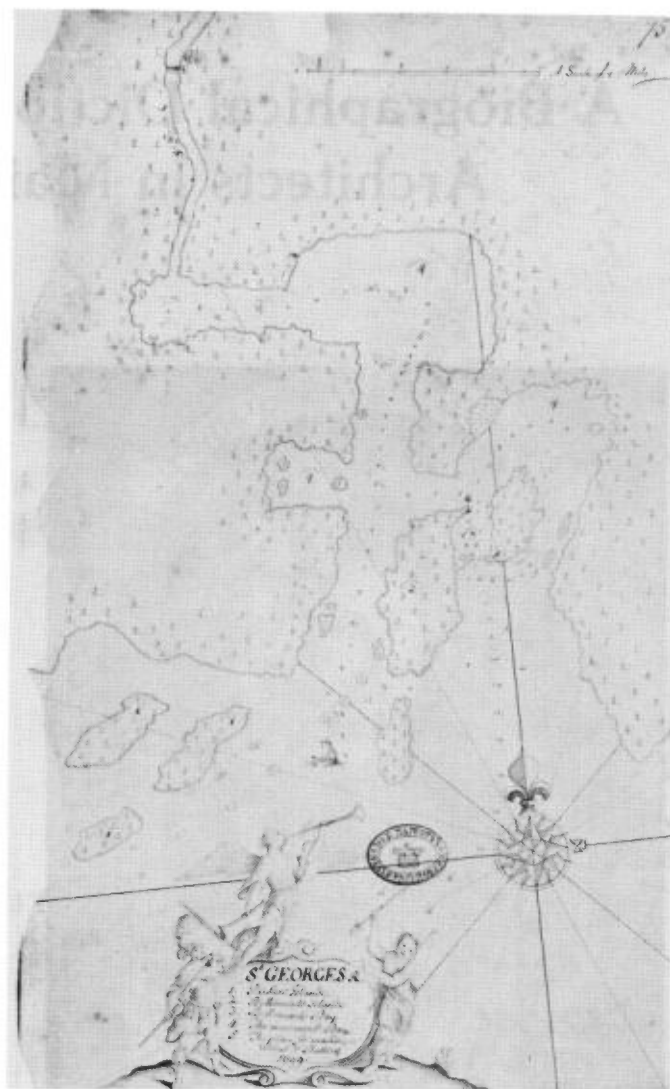


Figure 1. Map of St. Georges River, 1699. (All figures except for Figure 5 are by Colonel Romer. All figures are from the British Public Record Office.)

Maine had suffered terribly from the Indian Wars which had begun in 1675. Repeated attacks, many of them assisted by the Acadian French, had echoed in a provincial context the great power struggles in Europe. Anglo-American Maine by the 1690s was in shambles, with whole communities—indeed whole regions—abandoned by the English. The conflict which had called upon Romer's services in the English Channel and the Mediterranean spilled into the Colonies under the perhaps unfair name of "King William's War". The fate of the two major English settlements tells the story. Pemaquid, fortified in 1677 and destroyed in 1689, was re-fortified in 1692 and destroyed again in 1696. Portland (then known as Casco Neck or Falmouth), fortified in 1680, was destroyed in 1690.

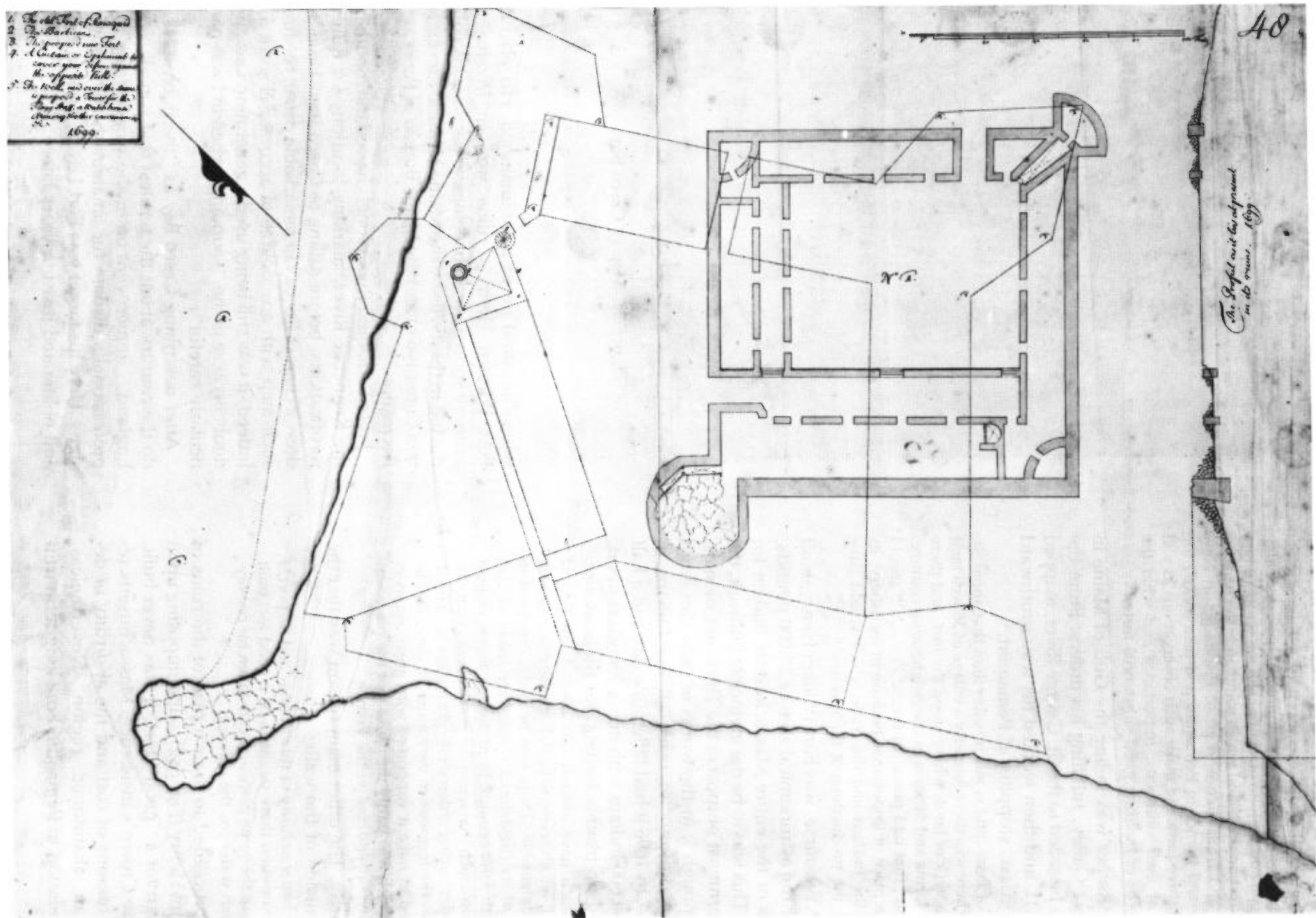


Figure 2. Fort William Henry, Bristol, 1699.

In May, 1699 Governor the Earl of Bellomont wrote to the Council of Trade and Plantations in England:⁵

Col. Romar (sic), the engineer, was gone to Boston to get a passage to England, but upon your orders I have stopt him, and since I am suddenly to go thither, I have wrote to him to view the fort on the Island which commands the harbour at Boston, and from thence to go to Piscataqua in New Hampshire and thence to Pemaquid and take (draw) the plans of all three forts and make such observations as will be proper of their situations, importance and what the charge may be of building good substantial forts.

In July, Romer was sailing the Gulf of Maine in the *Province Galley*, fulfilling his orders. From the Piscataqua he sailed to the St. George River, mapped it (Figure 1), and then worked his way southward along the coast, stopping at Pemaquid:⁶

The land of Pemaquid is much better than that about St. George's. There was there formerly a village of 36 well built houses on a neck of land, where stood the fort, and there were many farms and farmers in the neighboring country. 'Tis supposed that had peace continued Pemaquid would have been a place of importance because of its fishery, its trade with the Indians and the trade which would have arisen from the productions of the country.

The fort, of course, was Fort William Henry, built in 1692 for the astronomical sum of 20,000 pounds, two-thirds of the entire Massachusetts budget for that year. This was to be the invincible bulwark, the northeasternmost outpost of the Thirteen Colonies, "strong enough", in the words of then-Governor Sir William Phips, "to resist all the Indians in America".⁷ In 1696 it had fallen in a day and a half to a force of 600 Indians with minor French support. Romer had no trouble finding out the reasons:

The French have entirely demolished the Fort of Pemaquid, which seems to have been extremely ill-built and not defensible. There was no order observed in building it; its (fieldstone) walls were made of clay mixed with sand brought from the sea-shore, instead of lime, insomuch that when the French besieged it, the Commander having ordered two great guns to be fired, the wall of the fort was so very much shaken, that he was forced to have it supported with great beams of timber, which was partly the cause that the place was shamefully surrendered to the French.

Only partly. The other main reason was that the well lay outside of the walls:

For the better security of this frontier and its port, I am of the opinion there ought to be a good fort built much about the same place and care taken for conveying in fresh water for the garrison.

Romer proceeded to draw a plan of the ruins of Fort William Henry (Figure 2), superimposing upon it his design for a "good" fort. It was never built. Despite the Crown's insistence, Massachusetts refused for reasons of cost and the absurdity of defending an abandoned region. Nevertheless, Romer's mission to Pemaquid bore long-term fruit

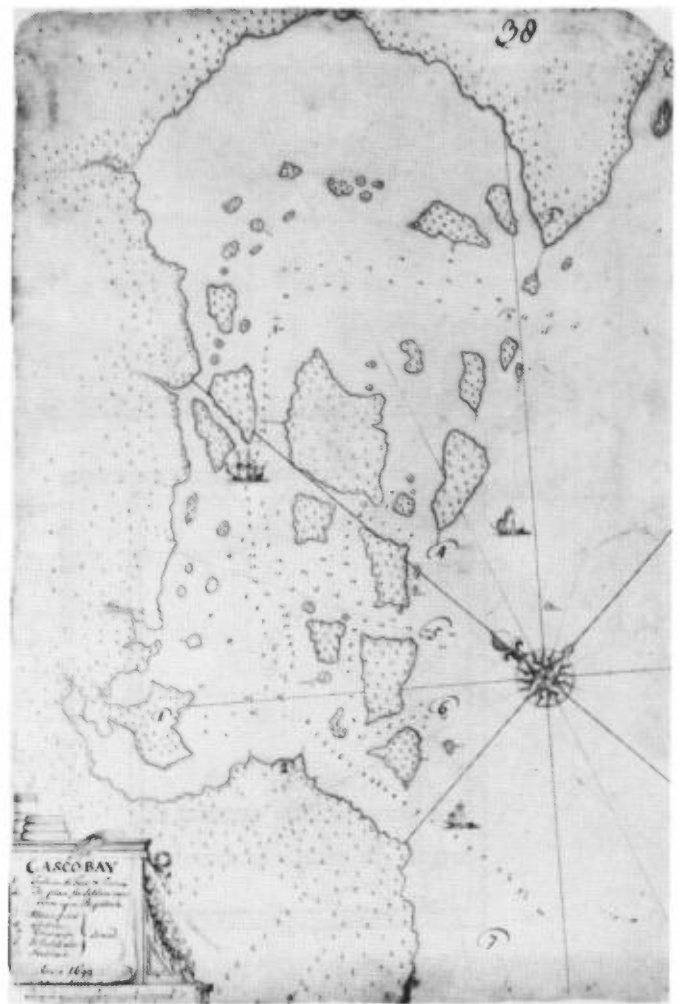


Figure 3. Map of Casco Bay, 1699.

which he could never have imagined. His plan of Fort William Henry's ruins was an invaluable primary source for archaeological excavations conducted in the 1970s by the Maine Historic Preservation Commission and the Maine Bureau of Parks and Recreation.

From Pemaquid the Colonel charted the mouth of the Kennebec River, marking locations for future fortifications, before sailing to Casco Bay. Here he drew a chart of the bay in remarkable detail, the first such map with any degree of accuracy (Figure 3). Indeed, it was still being used a generation later, no doubt because of the "soundings wherein I was particularly careful".

After describing Casco Bay as "the noblest, as I do the country about the fertilest that's in all New England", Romer went on to show once again the professional's disdain for amateurish colonial designs. Here his target was Fort Loyall, built in 1680 and obliterated just ten years later:

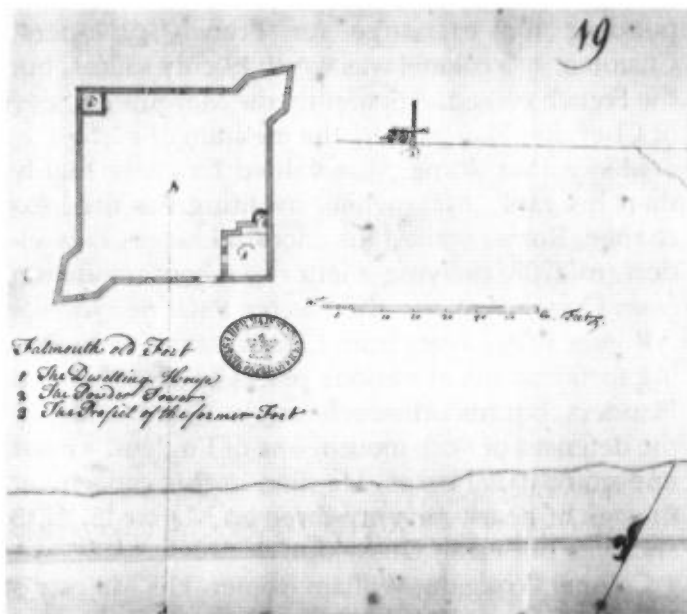


Figure 4. Falmouth Old Fort (Fort Loyall), Portland, 1699.

The French and Indians burnt the fort during the late war; it was built of wood and very ill contrived, being so seated on a neck of land that it could not be relieved. And as it was ill built, so it was ill kept in repair. Yet in confidence of this Fort, people were encouraged to build a pretty large village called Falmouth, consisting of 46 houses and a good Church, but all lies now in ruins. There are still to be seen the remains of houses of two stories high, with stone walls and chimneys, and there are 180 farms, besides a great many fishermen's houses. 'Tis a great pity that so fine a country should be deserted.

Proto-Portland paid the highest price for relying on an inadequate fort. In addition to drawing a plan of the charred remains of Fort Loyall (Figure 4), Romer, as at Pemaquid, designed a successor: "In case it were to be resettled (sic), I could advise a much more commodious place for building a town".

The "more commodious place" was to be lands near the mouth of the Presumpscot River in present-day Falmouth. Romer designed and in 1700 erected Fort New Casco, or "Casco Bay Fort", just east of the river as an incentive for resettlement of the region. It worked. This fort was properly sited and properly built, and it immediately attracted the return of the English to the bay a decade after its abandonment in 1690. Romer's fort, greatly enlarged in 1705 under the direction of the Colonel's successor, Captain John Redknapp, is depicted in the latter's plan of the complex (Figure 5). While built of wood, Fort New Casco was of state-of-the-art design, with arrowhead-shaped bastions, covered approaches, and a protected water supply. The site of this fortification has yet to be examined archaeologically, but when it is the plan of Romer's and Redknapp's forts will be of prime importance.

Having solved Casco Bay's problems, Romer sailed southward to the Saco River (Figure 6):

From Casco Bay I came to Winter Harbor, four miles from the mouth of Saco River, and went up in the pinnacle as high as the first falls or cascades, where I found a small fort, ill seated and worse built; it was made of (fieldstone) clay and sand, and the most considerable part of it, a small tower, ready to fall. The Fall makes so great a noise that one can scarce hear oneself speak.

Romer was describing Saco Fort, built just six years earlier in 1693. His plan and elevation of the structure (Figure 7) depict an eccentric and irregular polygonal affair, obviously not the design of a professional military engineer. The location confounded him as well, with the fort sited five miles upriver from the settlement of Winter Harbour, centered around Biddeford Pool. He guessed that the fort was "a place of defence for the salmon fishing" and urged the construction of "a good battery guarded by a redout (sic) at Winter Harbour". His advice was followed in 1708 with the demolition of Saco Fort and the erection of Fort Mary at Biddeford Pool.

Returning to Boston, Romer passed Wells, noting that the "village to W. of Saco consisting only in 10 or 20 houses which were fortified and well provided with provisions and ammunition, who, though they were besieged by 500 French Indians, forced them to retire with considerable loss". In other words, when Maine communities defended themselves from defensible places, all was well; when communities depended upon poorly-sited and poorly-built forts, disaster always ensued. Romer condemned Maine's defenses, not her defenders.

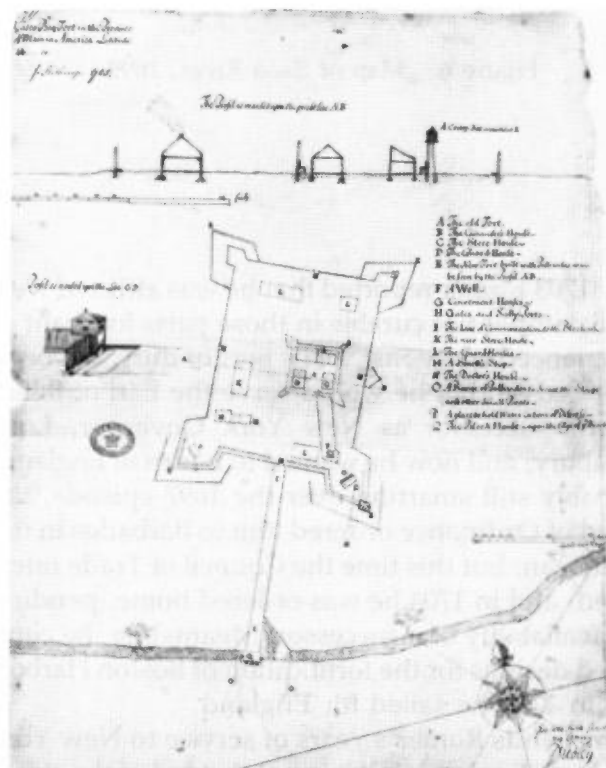


Figure 5. Casco Bay Fort (Fort New Casco), Falmouth, 1705, by Captain John Redknapp.

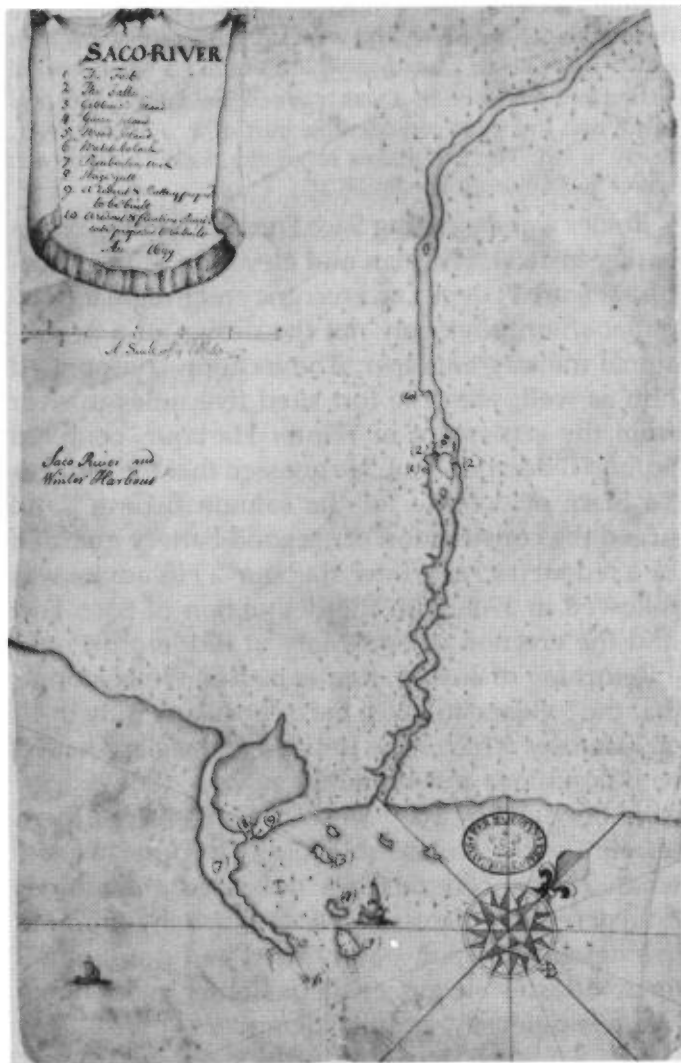


Figure 6. Map of Saco River, 1699.

By 1703 Romer reported that he was afflicted with “a distemper not curable in those parts for want of experienced surgeons”.⁸ His tour of duty had been extended so that he would serve the Earl of Bellomont’s successor as New York Governor, Lord Cornbury, and now he wanted to return to England. Probably still smarting over the 1697 episode, the Board of Ordinance ordered him to Barbados in the Caribbean; but this time the Council of Trade intervened, and in 1704 he was ordered home, pending the availability of a successor. Meanwhile, he completed designs for the fortification of Boston Harbor, and in 1706 he sailed for England.

Thus ends Romer’s years of service to New York and New England, but it is not the end of the story. On his voyage home he was captured by the French and imprisoned at St. Malo. Under the formal rules of warfare of the period, he was released on parole

pending his exchange for French prisoners. Customarily a colonel was worth twenty sailors, but the French balked. Apparently the Marquis de Levy or Chevalier Nangis were the medium of exchange, evidence that Romer was valued far more highly than his rank. Meanwhile, awaiting the final exchange, Romer visited his ancestral home, Dusseldorf, in 1707, carrying a letter of recommendation from Queen Anne to the Elector Palatine.

Romer’s final years from 1708 on saw him designing fortifications at various places in England and Flanders, but his prime role was as Commander of the defenses of Portsmouth, one of England’s most important naval bases. He died in this capacity at the age of nearly seventy-three on March 15, 1713 and was buried in Dusseldorf.

Colonel Wolfgang William Romer, His Majesty’s Engineer General, Chief Engineer of Ordnance, Chief Engineer of Artillery, Chief Engineer, Commander of Portsmouth, a string of titles in a world of titles. But behind these was a thorough professional who left us maps, plans, and designs pertaining to Maine at her lowest point. Had a Romer designed and built the Fort William Henrys, Fort Loyalls, and Fort Sacos, one wonders how different Maine would have been then and now.

Robert L. Bradley
January, 1987

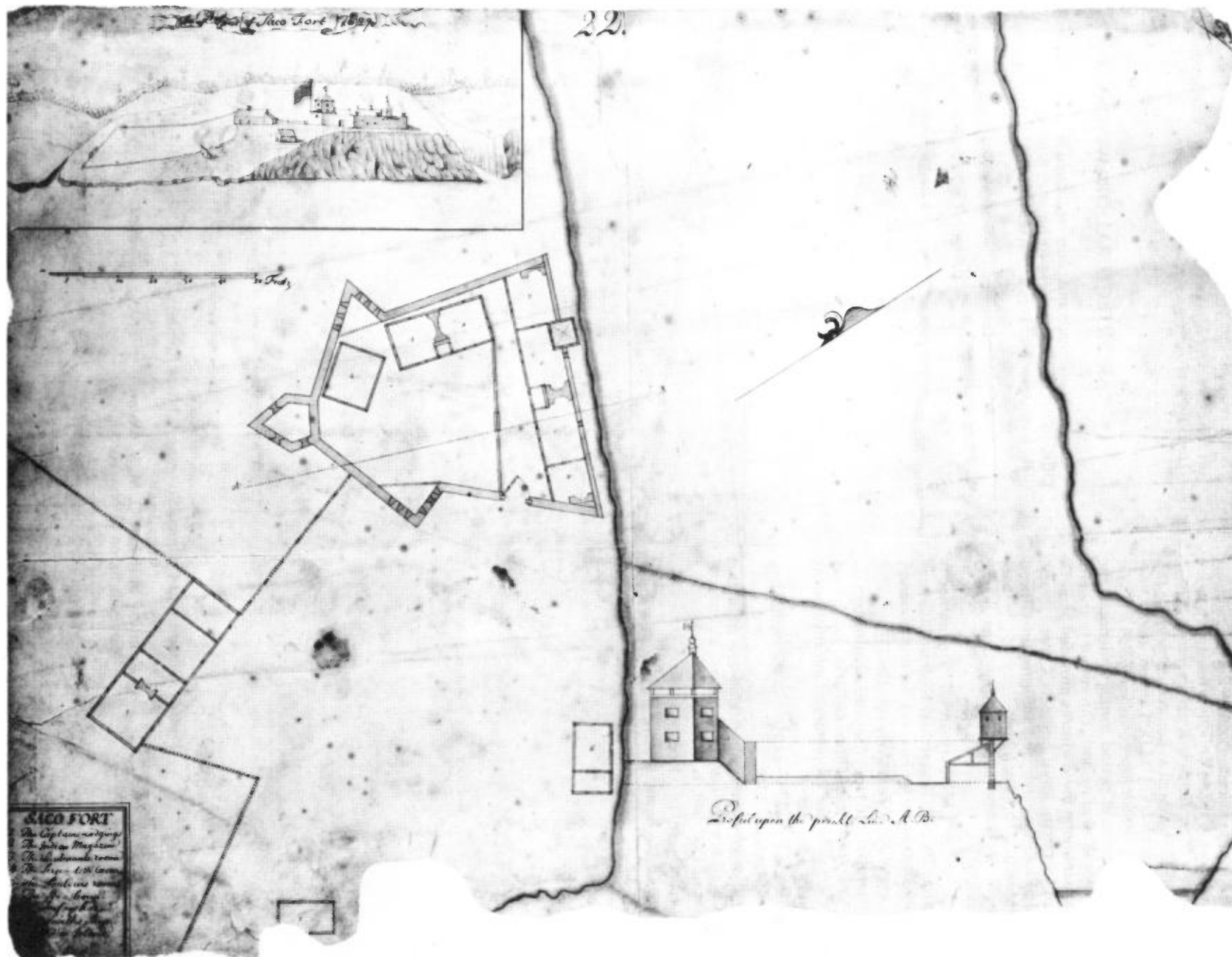


Figure 7. Saco Fort, Biddeford, 1699.

NOTES

- ¹ The principal source for Romer's life is the *Conolly Papers*, a set of notebooks compiled by Captain T. W. J. Conolly in developing a history of the Royal Engineers. These unpublished papers are in the collection of the Royal Engineers Library, Kent, England. Captain Conolly's research was the basis for the *History of the Corps of Royal Engineers*, Vol. I, Chatham, England, 1889, as well as Romer's entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. XLIX, London, 1897. Other sources are the *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series* and War Office Records consisting of period correspondence at the Public Record Office, Kew, England. The author is grateful for assistance in identifying these sources provided by E. D. Norris, Assistant Librarian, Royal Engineer Corps Library, Kent; E. Talbot Rice, Research and Information Officer, National Army Museum, London; John R. Kenyon, Librarian, National Museum of Wales; and Geoffrey Egan of the Museum of London.
- ² War Office, 46/4, p. 15, 9 February 1696/7. The author is grateful to Geoffrey Parnell, Researcher, Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England, for this reference.
- ³ *History of the Corps of Royal Engineers*, pp. 136-137.
- ⁴ The author is grateful to Paul Huey, Senior Scientist/Archaeologist for the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, for supplemental information on Romer's New York activities.
- ⁵ *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, America and West Indies*, Vol. 18, Doc. 384, London, 1910.
- ⁶ This and the following Romer quotations are from the "Memorial of Col. Romer to Lord Bellomont", *Calendar of State Papers*, *op. cit.*, Doc. 580, ix.
- ⁷ *Calendar of State Papers*, *op. cit.*, Doc. 545.
- ⁸ *Dictionary of National Biography*, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY COLONEL ROMER

Pemaquid Fort for Massachusetts Bay Colony, Bristol, 1699,
Not Executed.
Fort New Casco for Massachusetts Bay Colony, Falmouth, 1700,
Destroyed 1716, Now Archaeological Site.

ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

Romer's Maine maps and plans are located at the Public Record Office, Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, England TW9 4DU (catalogue numbers C.O.700/Maine/1-5, 9, 11).

Portrait Miniature of Colonel Wolfgang William Romer,
Circa 1690
Courtesy of Robert C. M. V. Wynn,
Seventh Baron of Newborough

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